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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to understand the ethical person, using the method of critical ontology. The idea of the ethical person is chosen for discussion in the belief that it is the key to understanding morality and the task of moral philosophy. The ethical vision we present here is one legitimate interpretation we have arrived at by applying the method of critical ontology. There could possibly be other epistemically justifiable interpretations, which the same method can provide.

THE ETHICAL PERSON
A Perspective of Critical Ontology

Joseph Kaipayil*

Invitation

In my recent book, *Critical Ontology: An Introductory Essay* (2002), I proposed a new method of philosophizing called Critical Ontology. This paper is an attempt to understand the ethical person, using the method of critical ontology. The idea of the ethical person is chosen for discussion in the belief that it is the key to understanding morality and the task of moral philosophy. The ethical vision we present here is one legitimate interpretation we have arrived at by applying the method of critical ontology. There could possibly be other epistemically justifiable interpretations, which the same method can provide.

Moral philosophy is not so much about the good and bad of particular acts; rather it is about the moral vision that shapes our moral acts and judgements. One's vision of life fashions one's decisions and deeds. The Christian obligation to do charity, for example, comes from the Christian vision that all people are children of God and hence we need to love and care for humanity. The ethical vision is about the ethical person, who is both the agent and beneficiary of ethical actions. Our understanding of who the ethical person is will determine our relationships with other humans and society at large. Not only does it influence our attitudes to and actions with fellow-humans but also our moral respect for nature. Arguably, acting according to the philosophical vision of the ethical person brings meaning and satisfaction to one's own and other's life.

Critical Ontology

We use the qualifier "critical" in the Kantian sense of requiring knowledge, philosophical knowledge included, be founded on empirical experience. Critical ontology, however, is not sympathetic to Kant's agnosticism of metaphysics. Metaphysics is possible and productive, provided it is based on the analysis of the empirical. Metaphysical postulations must be rational postulations, resulting from our reflections on

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the world of experience. The human intellect wants to comprehend the object of its thought. This comprehension is possible only if we get a unified view of that object, and any unified view is possible only if we have the knowledge of the principles that make the given object, the principles which give it existence, identity and unity. This metaphysical passage from the empirical to the transcendent is possible due to the inherent epistemic dynamism (ability) of the human intellect to achieve new and further insights into reality.

The term ontology has mainly been used in two ways. Traditionally it means the study of being qua being. In the usage of Analytical Philosophy, however, it means the discussion of the kinds of objects that exist. We employ the term in a new way, signifying the study of being-principles. By being-principle we mean the constitutive principle of the given object. Every entity has its being-principle, accounting for its existence and nature. Each entity is unique in identity and action by virtue of its being-principle. Thus to know an entity ultimately means to know its being-principle. The being-principle of an entity remains at the core of that entity, permeating all layers of its existence. The being-principle brings the different layers of the object in question into existence and holds them together in unity, making that particular entity what it is. And it is only by passing through the different layers of the given entity that we come to the discovery of its being-principle.

Critical ontology proposes three heuristic (epistemic) steps to the discovery of being-principles. They are: experience, analysis and postulation. First, we have the experience of the given reality we choose to reflect upon. Here we identify (determine or settle on) the object of our philosophical reflection and our experience of it in its various aspects. Second, we critically analyse the data of our experience, using logical and mathematical categories, the methods and insights of natural and social sciences and any other available legitimate means of analysis. Ideas of other philosophers and philosophies could also be used. Third, from and based on the analysis of the empirical we make a rational postulation as to what the being-principle of the given entity is.

Once we gain the knowledge of the being-principle(s), critical ontology makes the fourth move – the return to the empirical. This move, together with the three moves discussed above, completes the circle of

knowledge. We return to the empirical with the insight or vision of the being-principle(s) for relevant action. Cognition is beginning of knowledge and action is completion of knowledge.

The Ethical

Ethics is part of our every-day experience. We hear people discuss the good and bad of human actions. We ourselves often take part in the talk about morality. Sometimes we need to make judgements about the right and wrong of our own and other's deeds. There could be situations where we are confused as to which course of action we are to morally opt. Of course, reason plays an important role in our moral perceptions and judgements. As rational beings we use reason to find the good and bad of actions. We choose what is rationally (reasonably) good for us and we are justified in our choice. But reason alone cannot be made the criterion of morality. Rationality can become susceptible to self-interest and may lead to moral relativism. We can have rationality for egoism, for example. So we have to look for another condition that makes one's rationality a moral rationality. To find such a criterion of morality and moral justification, we should consider the kind of values the society endorses and the norms it generally makes to guide people in their social living. We choose modern liberal democracy for analysis.

Society did undergo various changes until it reached the present level of liberal democracy. Arguably, it is presently the best available form of political society. A liberal democracy is one that upholds people's right to self-determination in political governance, approves of cultural pluralism and guarantees fundamental human rights and personal freedoms. The liberal democracy is the result of people's self-consciousness that the individual human being is important and the political value is to promote human wellbeing. The political structure is in place to safeguard and advance human development and welfare. The good of life is seen as wellbeing. We have wellbeing when the whole of our embodied existence goes well. It means the satisfaction or happiness of life, resulting from our physical and psychological needs being reasonably met. However, the promotion of human wellbeing is to be done with respect for human dignity. The modern liberal democracy will not sanction an action that violates human dignity, even when it is intended for people's good. All human rights are based on the inviolability of human dignity. Human

wellbeing is to be promoted without violating human dignity. It is unethical and dehumanizing to neglect human wellbeing and infringe human dignity. An act is judged morally acceptable (morally good) if it enhances human welfare, preserving the dignity of human life.

For modern liberal democracy the political and moral good is, in short, individual wellbeing and human dignity. It protects this good by laws. But it does not answer why we should be moral and protect this good. The answer should come from the analysis of the human person. This we do next.

The Ethical Person

Ethics is relational. Moral responsibility and practice is my response to the other (other person). It is in the context of I-other relationship that a person becomes an ethical person, both as the doer and the recipient of an ethical action. When I perform an ethical action to someone, I become an ethical person as doer. When someone does an ethical action to me, I become an ethical person as a recipient of that action. But the question is: why should I be ethical to others and others to me. Neither is it me that constitutes the other an ethical being, nor is the other that constitutes me an ethical being. If it were so, morality would have been a matter of personal taste and relative choice and me and you could not have agreed on any course of action, making social life totally anarchic and impossible. So we should look for the being-principles that constitute morality and the moral person, the principles which the particular me and you can subscribe to.

If I and the other as particular individuals can neither constitute nor become the norm of morality, we should put both the egos (particular selves of me and the other) behind the "veil of ignorance" (Rawls). When my ego and your ego are thus temporarily suspended, what emerges is the human I which is present in you and me, making both of us human subjects. It is to this human subjectivity that we can subscribe. One is an ethical person because of this principle. Humans are ethical persons by virtue of being subjects and never objects.

A subject is a thinking, feeling and willing entity. Reason, emotion and volition – this triple mental function makes an entity a subject. Our brains are wired to think, feel and choose. These interrelated actions

together constitute the human mind (consciousness). In the exercise of these mental functions we become self-aware that we are subjects and not objects. If an entity does not posses these mental properties, it is considered an object. The human person is a subject and always refuses to be an object. The dignity of a human person arises out of the irreducibility of her or his subjectivity to objectivity. Any attempt to reduce the other to an object is an unethical act. The act is unethical, because I ontologically fail in my attempt to reduce the other to an object. If the other human being were intrinsically liable to objectification (reification), there wouldn't be any immorality for my effort to objectify her or him. I am attempting to perform an ontologically impossible task. I can make an attempt at objectification of the other subject but I fail in the end. I deny thought, emotion and volition to the other. But the other as subject always resists my attempt of her or his objectification. By my effort of dehumanizing the other, it is not the other but I that finally becomes dehumanized and unethical. In other words, when I do an unethical act to the other, the act rebounds on me and makes me unethical.

First, as a thinking being I reflect on my experience and form my epistemically justified (rational) beliefs. I have the right to hold my reasonably legitimate ideas and views. Right to the responsible exercise of thought and free speech is inalienable. Second, as a feeling being I desire for the emotional satisfaction of my life. I have the right to seek an adequate fulfillment of my emotional life. I want others to respect my feelings. Third, as a willing being I want to be an autonomous subject. I make myself a free person by responsible exercise of choices. I choose and become the author of my life.

If I, as a human subject, have right to thought, emotion and volition, I should concede the same right to other human beings. By the analogy of our nervous system and by the perception of what other people do and speak, I can reasonably infer that other people also have the similar mental states which I have. And if other people have thoughts, emotions and volitions like me, they are subjects on a par with me. They require the same respect that I accord to myself and my obligation to respect the other becomes a universal moral imperative.

In the light of our foregoing analysis of the ethical and the ethical person we submit that the human subject is the centre of morality. Human

wellbeing with respect for the human subject as rational, emotional and free entity is the being-principle that constitutes morality. And the human subject standing in moral reciprocity with the other is the being-principle that makes ethical persons. Then, the ethical task is our conscious acceptance of these principles and action accordingly.

The Ethical Task

Each human being, as subject, is valuable per se and demands our recognition, respect and regard. Moreover, it is in the context of my relationship with the other that I achieve my wellbeing. The other should be there to accord recognition, respect and regard to me. These understanding will take us to the ethics of intersubjectivity. The ethics of intersubjectivity speaks the truth that every human being is a subject and has inalienable dignity; it upholds fundamental human rights and personal freedoms. It demands a mutual respect for human dignity and responsibility for human welfare. The ethics of intersubjectivity makes our fundamental ethical task to be one of living our life with other humans in a truly good and meaningful way. It makes us feel the warmth of our being as being-with-the-other, infusing meaning and happiness into our interpersonal existence. It brings peace and prosperity to people, making national and international matrix work well.

We agree with Levinas that the ethical responsibility comes through the other. In my encounter with the other, the other calls for my ethical response. But we do not believe it is due to the other's pleading for my mercy. The face-to-face encounter must be one of equality, mutual respect and reciprocity. The respect and obligation for the other arise out of my ontological recognition of the other as a person on a par with me in dignity and basic liberties. A subject stands in relation with the other subject in the face-to-face reciprocity of equality and openness to mutual affirmation and enrichment.

The ontological and ethical relation and responsibility of intersubjectivity requires us to have open and meaningful dialogue. Only if I enter into a genuinely free and fair dialogue with the other can I live my intersubjectivity meaningfully well. As Rawls and Habermas rightly suggest, dialogue is essential for political intersubjectivity as well. A dialogical paradigm for intersubjectivity will protect the individual without

putting community into jeopardy. It will prevent the political authority from being totalitarian, make law and judiciary more humane and make us concerned about the least advantaged. Ultimately what counts important is the wellbeing and dignity of the individual. Society is but people, the interactive persons.

Interpersonal and social conflicts arise when one subject tries to make another an object. This attempt is unethical and the moral bad (sin for religion) enters into the world of interpersonal relations. The effort itself is self-defeating ontologically. In the first place, every subject refuses to be reduced to the level of an object and resists the attempt physically and psychologically. In the second place, the act rebounds on the doer, making her or him lose her or his dignified existence as a human subject. Unless people recognize the basic human relationality of intersubjectivity, they cannot get out of the master-slave (Hegel) or the being-for-itself versus being-in-itself (Sartre) tangle which makes social existence conflictual, unhappy and meaningless. Subject-object interpersonal relation is one of confrontation and conflict, whereas subject-subject relation is one of cooperation and concord.

In a pluralistic and democratic society, people can come together and ensure peace and social harmony only on the ontological vision of the human person. We can unite in the name of the human person and the dignity of human life. When religions become divisive and ideologies clash, it is to the ethical person that people can subscribe. The philosophy and ethics of intersubjectivity should be the antidote to a culture of death (terrorism and violence) and ethnic and communal hate. Where individuals are oppressed and their rights and freedoms are at stake and when those people and agencies accountable fail to safeguard and advance human welfare, the potential of the intersubjectivity vision and ideal shall not remain untapped.

Though this paper limits its ethical discussion to humans, a word might be said of environmental ethics. As beings-part-of-the world we have a responsibility towards entire nature. Of course, except humans no other entities in nature need to be respected as subjects. But caring for nature is an ecological need for the wellbeing of the human subjects. For our sake and for the sake of generations to come, we are to respect nature. Our responsibility for the other includes also our responsible use of nature.